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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ES](#)
SUBJECT: ARENA CONVENTION: UNITY OR MUTINY?

REF: A. SAN SALVADOR 947
[1](#)B. DAO IIR

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On October 11, the center-right National Republican Alliance (ARENA) party held its annual national convention. Former Salvadoran presidents, including Tony Saca, emphasized party unity in their addresses. However, the day after the convention, twelve ARENA legislative deputies announced they would not necessarily vote with the party unless the National Executive Council (COENA), ARENA's governing body, is reconfigured to include them. Embassy believes these twelve deputies are allied with former President Saca. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) The ARENA convention, attended by all living former Salvadoran presidents, reaffirmed the party's current rebuilding course, as expected (see reftel A). The party re-confirmed the COENA, which had been serving in an interim capacity since a post-election convention in June. Even though his loyalists were purged to make room for this COENA, Tony Saca himself presented the COENA for ratification and said although "arguments can be healthy . . . we must now look forward." COENA president (and former president of El Salvador) Alfredo Cristiani struck a similar tone of unity by closing his keynote address with a call for "everyone to push together in the same direction."

[1](#)3. (C) However, the day after the convention, twelve ARENA deputies (of 32 total) announced they would no longer vote the party line in protest of what they consider COENA's "closed doors." They demanded that several COENA members be replaced by members of their dissident bloc. According to an article in La Prensa Grafica, if their demands are not met, they threatened to vote with any other party, including the FMLN, "to benefit the Salvadoran people." News reports indicate these twelve legislators did not attend the party's convention the previous day.

[1](#)4. (S/NF) The dissident group is led by Guillermo Gallegos, former ARENA head of faction in the Legislative Assembly during Saca's presidency. An Embassy source suggests Gallegos may be receiving covert payments from Saca in exchange for his loyalty (see reftel A). The other members of the group represent mostly rural, poorer departments; only Gallegos is from San Salvador. All of the 12 deputies are among the 23 or 24 deputies that DAO reporting indicates are on former President Saca's secret payroll (see reftel B).

[1](#)5. (C) According to La Prensa Grafica, Cristiani publicly responded to these "threats" by calling for dialogue with the dissident bloc. He met with the COENA for several hours following the bloc's announcement. After the meeting, Cristiani announced that the COENA prefers to resolve differences with the bloc "through mutual understanding."

[1](#)6. (C) Comment: The dissident bloc's threat to split with the party made a farce of the united image ARENA presented at the

convention. While Cristiani criticized the internally divided FMLN as a "two headed monster," it is increasingly apparent that his own party may also have two heads: Cristiani and Saca. Whether or not Saca is behind the dissidents, the party has serious internal divisions it must resolve to have any hope of expanding its representation in the legislature in the 2012 elections.

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